

Plato's Political Philosophy: The *Republic*, the *Statesman*, and the *Laws*

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If Socrates is said to have invented ethics, it is his pupil Plato who has been credited by posterity with the invention of political philosophy.¹ Socrates taught Plato that the fundamental question of how to live well² was both a question demanding philosophical inquiry (as opposed to being answered authoritatively by poetry, law, or tradition), and a question which trenched on the claims of existing political regimes to be good regimes. For if those regimes failed to promote the practice of philosophy which could uniquely identify (and perhaps even constitute) the human good, their principles of organization and value must be faulty.

Distinguishing Socrates from Plato is a hazardous business, since all our evidence of Socrates' views is indirect and most of it comes from Plato's dialogues themselves. Nevertheless, most readers of Plato today assume that the "Socrates" who figures as a character in Plato's *Republic* is not to be identified with the historical Socrates. And since Socrates does not appear in the *Laws* and appears only at the beginning of the *Statesman*, all three dialogues we are considering as the core of Plato's political philosophy are generally regarded as expressing the ideas of Plato rather than those of Socrates.³ On these terms, we can say that Plato did not follow his teacher in restricting himself in

1. According to Cicero (*Tusc.* 5. 4): "Socrates, however, called philosophy down from heaven and placed it in the midst of our cities, even introduced it into our homes, and forced it to ask questions about our life, morals, and the good and bad in things." For an argument that political philosophy was invented by pro-democratic thinkers in Athens rather than by the critic of democracy Plato, see Farrar (1988); the contrary case – that political philosophy was a genre invented by Plato in order better to express his critique of Athenian democracy – is put strongly by Ober (1998); and see also Nightingale (1995).

2. "Eu prattein" ("do well") are the closing words of the *Republic*, linked etymologically to eudaemonia, the state of happiness or, literally, being well treated by the gods.

3. Many scholars take the fact that both the method and certain assumptions or positions in the *Republic* diverge so far from the relatively unified group of "early" dialogues, to indicate that the "Socrates" of the *Republic* has become a mouthpiece for Plato's views, although it has become fashionable to point out that one cannot necessarily identify the views of a dialogue's author with those expressed by any one character within the dialogue. It remains true that, whatever one thinks as to whether any of the dialogues can be taken to express the views either of (Plato's version of) the historical Socrates or of Plato himself, the texture and project of the *Republic* are in important ways very different from most other dialogues in which Socrates appears (see the section on the *Republic* below).

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political matters to a critique of the ethics and (by implication) the politics of Athens. He went further, offering in two dialogues full-scale reconstructions of what a good city might look like. And he also went beyond Socrates in his explorations of what philosophy itself should be, drawing on Pythagorean and Eleatic sources as well (the Pythagoreans were themselves steeped in political concerns).

In sum, Plato searched for a political art (*politikē technē*), a form of knowledge which can use power to produce ethical good, as opposed to using power for the gratification of desire or honor (Wallach, 2001, p. 1). The fundamental axiom of his political thought is the claim that knowledge must govern or "rule" human action – indeed, that genuine knowledge is the most important and perhaps (as is argued in the *Statesman*) the sole proper criterion of good rule. This was the consistent orienting principle of Plato's political thought, one which he took to be antithetical not only to Athens, but also to all other regimes of his own day. It informs all three of the dialogues to be considered in this chapter.

Yet the three dialogues differ from each other along at least two crucial dimensions. First, their projects and purposes are quite different. The point of the *Republic* is to show that knowledge in the ruling group or element is the key to well-being and health in the city and soul alike. The burden of the *Statesman* is to explicate what such ruling knowledge could consist in, and what the nature of such rule could be. And the purpose of the *Laws* is to show how knowledge can be embedded in the structure of the city itself, so that the city like the dialogue becomes an instantiation of the very principle that it advocates – the principle that knowledge must rule (Nightingale, 1993). Second, the psychology, epistemology, and metaphysics which Plato uses to underpin his political arguments changes in crucial respects between the three dialogues. Yet his concern with distinct questions about politics in each means that it may be too swift to claim (as do Bobonich, 2002, pp. 1–8 and *passim*; and Rowe, 2003, p. 92) that it is changes in psychology and epistemology that drive the changes in Plato's politics, and not vice versa. Differing political projects may themselves imply and generate different views of motivation and possible knowledge.

The matrix resulting from changes on both axes yields a corpus of political philosophy which is at once one and many, both unified by common themes and internally differentiated. The achievement of unity in the city is, as Jean-François Pradeau (2002) has shown, a major concern for Plato, as is the more general philosophical status of being one or whole despite having many parts (Harte, 2002; McCabe, 1994). So it is only fitting that both his political philosophy itself and the principal works in which he expressed it are achievements of this kind.

Despite their different casts of characters, the *Republic* and the *Laws* are a common order of magnitude longer than all of Plato's other dialogues, and the fact that both depict aspects of an envisaged admirable city at great length has led readers so minded to identify them as the core texts of Plato's political philosophy. The case for treating the *Statesman* as a third such core political text is different, and more recent. Whereas the *Republic* and the *Laws* build legal and political edifices on the foundational claim that knowledge should rule, the *Statesman* excavates the meaning of that foundation itself. It is accordingly a shorter and more abstract dialogue, one that offers painstaking clarification (and in some respects revision, as will be shown below) of a limited but vital contention in Plato's political thought.

But while there is a case for calling the *Republic*, the *Statesman* and the *Laws* a distinct body of work constituting "Plato's political philosophy,"⁴ two caveats must be entered to that case before it is further pursued. The first is that these are not alone among Plato's works in having a political dimension. All his dialogues do. In part, this is because politics and indeed everyday life were saturated with ethical terms in ancient Athens, albeit terms which Plato rejected, and because his philosophical investigations of virtue and nature themselves bear on political questions. But further, an Athenian jury condemned Socrates to death. The resulting dilemmas – is philosophical knowledge at war with the equality of democratic opinion? If so, how can democracy tolerate philosophy, and how can philosophy tolerate democracy? – pervade the Platonic corpus as a whole.

The second point is the converse of the first. For while all of Plato's works bear on politics, all of them also address questions other than politics. One might say that Plato treats politics, but also puts it in its place: that of a crucial but instrumental human concern, which like all purely human concerns is further subordinated to what is divine. If Plato invented political philosophy, he also insisted that it is at once connected to the rest of philosophy (psychology, epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics) and that it does not exhaust the purpose of philosophy. Our three dialogues illustrate the former point by each resting most heavily on a particular philosophical plank – ethics in the *Republic*, epistemology in the *Statesman*, theology in the *Laws*. And they illustrate the latter point by showing (each in its own way) that the reasons to be concerned with politics are located in what lies beyond politics – the eschatological future life of the soul in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, general dialectical or philosophical ability in the *Statesman*.

Republic

Having contended that the *Republic* belongs in the corpus of Plato's political philosophy, we must immediately confront a challenge. For it has been argued that, given that the text is governed by an ethical question – why should anyone bother being just? – it is not at bottom a work of political philosophy at all (Annas, 1999; see the discussion of this question in Penner, *PLATO'S ETHICS*, in this volume). On this view, the sketch of Kallipolis (as the ideal city described in the *Republic* is sometimes called) is a mere cartoon, meant as an illustration of the possibilities of governing one's soul rather than as a blueprint for a political regime.⁵

4. Whereas an author like Klosko (1986) spent most of his time on the *Republic* and treated the *Statesman* and the *Laws* cursorily as stages of decline, the more recent contribution of Samaras (2002) interprets the sequence as building up to the *Laws* as a climax. Samaras adds a brief consideration of the *Timaeus* and *Critias* between the *Statesman* and the *Laws*. Wallach (2001) treats a far greater number of dialogues as integral to his account of Plato's political thought.

5. "Blueprint" here is a shorthand way of capturing what most participants in this debate take a "political" dialogue to be; for criticism of the idea that the politics of the dialogue involve a "blueprint" at all, see Waldron (1995, pp. 159 and *passim*), though he adheres to the view being

It is right to point out that ethics motivates the *Republic*, and that concern for the fate of the individual immortal soul concludes it. Socrates goes so far as to say that even if Glaucon is right that the city they have described does not exist "anywhere on earth" (and cannot do so without the help of "divine good luck"), "perhaps . . . there is a model of it in heaven, for anyone who wants to look at it and to make himself its citizen on the strength of what he sees" (IX, 592b). True political philosophy describes the city in which the philosopher would wish to be an active citizen, and so long as that city does not exist, the philosopher will restrict himself to sculpting its order in his own soul rather than seeking to take part in public life.

Nevertheless, to conclude that politics in the *Republic* is at best a sideshow is mistaken. By placing politics in its ethical and eschatological contexts, that text shows just why and how politics matters so profoundly – and so why existing regimes are so dangerously perverse. While it can be argued that ethics overshadows politics in the *Republic*, it is equally true to say that politics there infiltrates ethics, showing that there exist a politics of self-care and a politics of friendship as well as the conventional politics of the city. All of these political regimes, large and small, are instruments necessary to give people the chance to be as happy as they can be. Although only true philosophers can and will be truly happy – since happiness depends on the harmonious rule of reason which only they can secure for themselves – other people will be as happy as possible in this life only if they live in Kallipolis, and only there are they likely to have the opportunity to do better for themselves by choosing rationally for the life to come. So Plato is not merely using politics to illustrate tricky points in ethics. He is genuinely seeking to invent a political philosophy, one which can expose why virtually all of the political arguments of his day (both for and against democracy) are shallow and bankrupt, "sophistry" rather than "philosophy." It is in the *Republic* that Plato invents a new conceptual language – rooted in a psychology, an epistemology and a metaphysics – which underwrites his profound critique of democratic and indeed all existing politics as indifferent to value, to virtue, and to knowledge.

But if the *Republic* takes this giant step forward in the corpus of Plato's writings, it grows out of questions worried over repeatedly in other dialogues. In several dialogues Socrates raises the question of whether there is any master knowledge: a kind of knowledge that would govern the entire course of life and specifically the good of the soul, in the way that medical knowledge is acknowledged to govern the good of the body (e.g., *Prt.* 313a–b; see generally on the "master knowledge" aporetic dialogues, Sprague, 1976). He also suggests that if knowledge is the criterion that Athenians accept when they are choosing doctors or ship captains, should it not *a fortiori* be the criterion used when making political decisions? (Socrates in the *Gorgias*, 502d–e: good orators with philosophical knowledge would "set their sights on making the citizens as good as possible through their speeches," as opposed to the Athenian orators who are "bent upon the gratification of the citizens and . . . slight the common good for the sake of

criticized here, that the dialogue is ethical as opposed to political: he says that "the construction of an ideal society is imagined by Socrates and his friends not as the articulation of a political proposal but as a way of answering an ethical challenge" (p. 143). See also Lane (1999, pp. 120–1, 134–5).

their own private good.") But the difficulty lies in knowing whether there is any such overall knowledge relevant to the success and happiness of life, and what its content might be.

The *Republic* triumphantly answers this question by linking the conception of Forms which emerges in other dialogues (notably the *Phaedo*) with the conception of the knowledge of choiceworthiness – or goodness – which emerges in the "master knowledge" dialogues. The rulers should know the Form of the Good, but only the philosophers can know this – hence the philosophers should rule. These pathetic creatures who skulk in corners and appear to sophists like Callicles (*Grg.* 484c–485e) and even to decent young men like Adeimantus (*Rep.* VI, 487c–d) to be politically useless, utterly irrelevant to the real business of life, are in fact the principal hope for any city's salvation.

Yet even here lies danger, in two directions. The first is how to prevent exploitation of the ruled by the rulers: how can rulers be kept gentle guard-dogs rather than becoming rapacious wolves? Virtually anyone who wants power may want it, or come to want to use it, to exploit the ruled rather than serve them. Books II–IV outline an answer, which is then deepened in the second "philosophical" description of the ideal city in Books V–VII, and which is not always recognized as being as startling as it is. For Socrates does not rely on the fact that the rulers will be wise (Books II–IV) and even genuinely philosophical (Books V–VII) as a sufficient safeguard of their justice toward the ruled. Rather, the ruling guardians must be deprived of any possibility of exploiting those they rule, by the drastic expedient of being deprived themselves of family bonds and private property. Only if rulers have no children or relatives to favour, and no chance of accumulating property to favour them with, will those they govern be truly safe. To put it in the terms of Book I, only a shepherd without prospect of wealth or family will care for his sheep for their sake rather than his own.

The second danger takes the form of a paradox. It was argued in response to the first danger that only those who do not want to rule and have no private incentive to want to rule, can be trusted to rule. How then can the reluctant potential rulers be induced to rule? Book I already sketches one answer to this. Socrates states that "wages must be provided to a person if he's to be willing to rule, whether in the form of money or honor [money being rejected in Book V when communism for the guardians is introduced] or a penalty if he refuses" (347a). But, he continues, "good people won't be willing to rule for the sake of either money or honor. . . . So, if they're to be willing to rule, some compulsion or punishment must be brought to bear on them . . ." (347b). This is amplified in one direction in Book IV (419a–421c), when Socrates retorts to Adeimantus – who is troubled that the rulers, deprived of money and luxury, will not be happy – that justice will be most easily found when the whole city is happy. This in turn depends on the rulers playing their part along with the other groups of citizens, though Socrates later pointedly observes to Adeimantus' brother that the guardian-rulers will enjoy victory and public acclaim and so happiness more than that of Olympic victors (V, 465d–e). It is amplified in a different direction in Book VI (499b–d), in the thought that philosophers unwilling to rule may sometimes be "compelled" by chance or necessity (which Greek thought did not sharply distinguish) to rule, or existing kings may be inspired by "a god" to love philosophy. But the problem is nowhere fully resolved. A good political regime is vital if the majority of people – all but the

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philosophers – are to be able to be as non-miserable as they can be, yet the prospects of establishing such a regime are hazardous, chancy, and extremely dim.⁶

Let us return to the ethical frame of the argument, as set out especially in Books I–II and IX. The text opens with a discussion about the nature of justice at the home of a wealthy metic living in the Piraeus, the Athenian port which stands outside the walls of the city proper. This discussion, in which three interlocutors successively replace one another in the role of being questioned by Socrates, anticipates many of the points made in the remainder of the text. For present purposes the crucial part is the exchange between Socrates and Thrasymachus, a “sophist” who aggressively exposes what he sees as the argumentative ploys used by Socrates against the previous speaker. Thrasymachus takes the position that justice is the advantage of the strong as defined by them for their purposes in controlling and exploiting the weak: if shepherds care for their flock, it is only to fatten them for a more valuable kill. Socrates tries to argue that acting justly is in fact in the interests of the just person. But two of the listeners are not fully convinced. While Thrasymachus argues that the strong pull the wool over the eyes of the weak (justice is never in the interests of the ruled), these two youths pose a slightly different problem. For them, the weak may have reason to be just rather than unjust if they know they can’t get away with flouting the laws publicly. But the best thing for the weak would be to be able to get away with acting unjustly. While it is better for them to pull the wool over their own eyes than not to do so if the only alternative is to be destroyed, it would be better still for them to deceive their fellows instead of themselves by getting unjust gains at no reputational cost.

These two interlocutors – brothers bearing the names of Plato’s actual brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus – therefore challenge Socrates more fully to answer the question, why be just? They explain that while they do not believe that it is better to be unjust, they equally don’t believe that the case that justice is what really benefits the individual has been made well enough by any of the poets or philosophers who have addressed the question. No wonder that many of the young are cynical about doing what their elders tell them is right and living on the straight and narrow path; even these two, who have withstood the temptations of injustice, are not immune to the vaunting of its attractions. The rest of the *Republic* is Socrates’ response to this request, in the form of an attempted proof that justice – not the apparent attractions of injustice – is what most truly benefits the individual.

In passing we should note that it is crucial to the dialogue’s structure (and to what distinguishes it from the “Socratic” dialogues) that the youthful brothers at no point themselves defend the contention that it is better to be unjust – they merely say that they have not heard it be sufficiently well refuted and ask Socrates to do so. In the aporetic dialogues, Socrates characteristically insists that the person he is questioning

6. One line of commentators, inspired by Leo Strauss, has indeed held that the real, hidden message of the *Republic* is that the realization of the ideal city is impossible – contrary to Socrates’ repeated assertions in Book V of the ways in which the regime will be “possible” and “beneficial.” See Strauss (1987) and the representative debate between Bloom (1977) and Hall (1977). The view taken here is that it is possible to realize the ideal city, though this may depend on divine aid (see below).

must say sincerely what he actually believes. Here, Glaucon and Adeimantus are at pains to deny that they themselves believe that it is better (for oneself) to act unjustly rather than justly. Instead of putting energy into refutation, therefore, Socrates is free to put his energy into constructive argument – and the brothers, who assert that they have been tempted by, but never succumbed to, the claim that injustice really pays, are presented as free to be persuaded.

Socrates' response is, in a nutshell, to argue that justice is what really benefits the individual because justice contributes along with the other three cardinal virtues to the harmony of the soul. The just person is at peace with himself because and insofar as his soul is well-ordered; the unjust person is miserable because his soul is divided and disordered. And the proper order of the soul is for it to be governed by knowledge. This is where the brothers' ethical question "why justice," intersects with the classic Socratic problematic about knowledge ruling. Each person's happiness depends on their soul being ruled by knowledge. But only in the case of true philosophers is their reason capable of doing the job alone. For most people, the possibility of happiness and justice depends on their reason being supplemented by surrogate reason from outside: either because their own reason has not attained the true objects of knowledge which the surrogate reason has done, or because their own reason is too weak to do the job on its own. "[I]t is better for everyone to be ruled by divine reason, preferably within himself and his own, otherwise imposed from without, so that as far as possible, all will be alike and friends, governed by the same thing" (IX, 590d). Being governed by such surrogate external reason may not be enough to make a non-philosopher really just or happy. But it will get them as close as they can get, and in particular will save them from the out-of-control appetites that would otherwise render their misery complete.

Such a portrait of complete misery is drawn in Book IX – the tyrant – and is identified as the epitome of the unjust person, in contrast with the philosopher who is the epitome of the just. In virtue of his ability to satisfy all his lusts – the very ability which Glaucon and Adeimantus had heard described as admirable for those who can attain it – he is miserable. The objects of lust do not confer happiness. Only a well-ordered soul ruled by reason can do that, so being ruled by lust and greed, the tyrant forfeits his chance for happiness. At this point the argument has come full circle – from the temptations of tyranny described by Glaucon and Adeimantus in Book II, to the abhorrence with which Glaucon meets the description of the tyrant in the terms just sketched in Book IX. But the *Republic* does not end there. The brothers had originally challenged Socrates to prove that justice pays in itself, not in virtue of the rewards which a reputation for justice might attract. Glaucon vividly posed the challenge by telling the story of the ring of Gyges (II, 359c–360d), a ring which makes its bearer invisible and so allows him to profit from injustice; he also imagines a just person who, conversely, is maligned and maltreated so as to suffer from all manner of worldly evils – reviled and poor, is his justice any real consolation? In Books IX and X Socrates completes the argument by pointing out the usual benefits which being just brings in its train, together with the more unusual ones – namely, the benefit justice confers on you not only in this life but in the next. The myth of Er is one of several eschatological myths in Plato. Here, in a neat and important twist, what justice gains you after death is not a divinely conferred reward, but rather the ability to choose wisely – unclouded by lust or ambition – among the various lives on offer for the next life. It is the link between justice and

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wisdom – that is, between virtue and knowledge – rather than justice alone which is the key to happiness in the *Republic*.

The skeleton of the argument should now be clear. At its core are two central ribs, one psychological, the other epistemological. We may say that the psychology of the *Republic* pluralizes, politicizes, and platonizes the soul. For what does it mean for souls to be potentially divided and so badly or well-ordered? The idea that injustice arises from a divided and disordered soul contradicts the thesis of many Socratic dialogues that evil (including injustice) is done only out of ignorance, a thesis which denies the possibility of acting against what you know to be right or best (the possibility of *akrasia* or “weakness of will”). In the *Republic*, evil may be done due to ignorance – one may have a well-enough-ordered soul but one’s reason is not sufficiently well cultivated to have attained moral knowledge. But evil may also be done out of disorder of the soul, and this is explained for the first time by a pluralization of the soul: each soul has parts.

By analogy with social-functional classes in the city, it is argued that there are three parts of the soul. Appetite and reason are obvious candidates for two of these; indeed, the thought that appetite can sometimes oppose reason is at the heart of the folk understanding of *akrasia* which Socrates so counter-intuitively denies in other dialogues. The third part is harder to isolate; Danielle Allen (2000, pp. 245–6) has shown how the argument identifying this as the *thumos* or spirited part serves to transform the Athenian political and psychological landscape, by prompting readers to reject the results of angry Athenian punishments and seek instead to find their honor in the course of reason. Each of these “agent-like” parts of the soul has a characteristic goal and is capable of a primitive form of practical reasoning to attain that goal (Bobonich, 2002, pp. 217–22). This is one reason that “appetite” is a better translation of *epithumia* than “desire,” because all three parts have their own characteristic “desires.” Appetite seeks satisfaction for particular bodily wants and chooses objects which it believes will satisfy those wants, believing further that the satisfaction of wants constitutes the good life. *Thumos* seeks honor and evaluates what it takes to be occasions to display courage in order to achieve that goal, believing further that the attainment of honor constitutes the good life. Reason seeks knowledge including knowledge of the good, believing (when properly educated) that the attainment of such knowledge constitutes the good life.

Such a psychic structure is not only plural, but also political. By this is meant that the soul is figured as a mini-polis, a political unit in which order and rule must be established. What must most be avoided is *stasis*, or factional uprisings against good rule – in the case of the soul, this happens when *thumos* allies itself with appetite instead of with its natural ally, reason. And it is the thesis that reason is the best ruler of the soul which constitutes the soul’s platonization. The soul is not ideally a democracy. The justification for the rule of reason is not that it has been chosen by the other two parts to rule, but because its rule is the best and only path to happiness for the individual. Freedom, as Socrates concludes in Book IX, can only be given to children or to cities once a constitution or “*politeia*” has been established in them (IX, 590e).

This account has been called inconsistent and contradictory (Williams, 1973). If each individual has a tripartite soul, how can the city consist of three distinct “parts” or social groups each corresponding to a single part of the individual soul? Jonathan Lear (1998 [1992]) has resolved this apparent inconsistency by offering

a psychodynamics of the interaction between soul and city, showing how the apparently static model of Books II–IV comes to life in the psycho-civic-dramas of regime degeneration in Books VIII–IX.⁷ Each timocrat, say, does have three parts to his soul, but the *thumos* or honor-loving part is predominant, setting the goals for the person as a whole, and so stamping its character on the city where he and those like him predominate.

Why, though, should reason be willing to rule in the soul, given the acute and unresolved problems in the text as to why and indeed whether philosophers would be willing to rule in the city? This is the second objection. The best explanation as to why reason should be ready to rule in the soul appeals to the fact that reason in Plato is an intrinsic orderer, inherently motivated to promote the existence of good order in the world. But if this were enough also to answer the question as to why the philosophers would be willing to rule in the city, the reiteration of the roles of chance, necessity, and compulsion in bringing them to do so would be pointless. The disjuncture between the willingness of psychic reason and living philosophers to rule can be explained as follows. By ruling in the soul, reason is performing a natural ordering function: its role in the soul is indeed that of innate and intrinsic orderer. But it is not natural, in the Platonic sense of what is teleologically best, that one person's reason should have to order the soul of another. The political relationship, that is, is not natural. It is necessary only because of the weakness, perversion, or failure of the reason of the person who needs (in Platonic terms) to be ruled.

So reason, which would be teleologically driven to contemplate the Forms and establish justice in its own bearer's soul, is forced to turn away from those perfections in order to compensate for the weaknesses of reason in others. This conduces to justice in that it enables reason everywhere to be bolstered in its rightful task of ruling, and so enables the city as a whole to be as happy as possible. And it may be required by justice if so doing repays a debt incurred in the education of the philosophers. But if it can be explained as a surrogate procedure required by "goodness," it forms no part of "bestness," and so reason's intrinsic ordering function does not solve the problem of why the philosophers should be willing to rule.

We have here begun to trench on the ultimate metaphysical teaching of the *Republic*, that is, the Form of the Good. For to say that reason's proper object is knowledge, as was said above, is not yet to have said enough. As was shown at the outset of this discussion of the *Republic*, the question raised by many other dialogues is – knowledge of what? What kind of knowledge is it that is capable of governing our lives for the best?

"What kind" can mean "what nature" or "what content," and the *Republic* addresses both of these meanings for the question above. First, the nature of the knowledge relevant to politics and appropriate as an object for reason. This knowledge must remain stable across many different contexts, if it is to be useful for political life. So,

7. Ferrari (2003) has challenged Lear's account, arguing that these processes are not evident in the text of the dialogue and offering a different interpretation of the city-soul relationship (and the problems it raises) from those given not only by Lear but also by the classic paper to which Lear himself had responded (Williams, 1973); this challenge cannot be assessed here, but the present author remains persuaded of the value of Lear's insight.

Socrates argues, it cannot owe anything to those contexts in themselves: it cannot be relative or situational. Plato therefore infers that there must be objects of knowledge which are by nature context-independent, unaltered by changes in time and space. It is the absolute nature of these objects that enables them to serve as a standard and touchstone by which the philosophers orient themselves in the world of action. These objects are the Forms. There is not exactly a "theory of Forms" in the *Republic* – the remarks made about them are called provisional and insufficient. Yet the aspiration to knowledge which is timeless and context-independent, and which is also value-relevant and so relevant to action, is embodied unforgettably in Socrates' contrast between those who love ordinary sensuous objects and those who love the Forms.

But there are many Forms – the beautiful, the just, alongside the more problematic example in Book X of the Form of the couch (on Book X, see Burnyeat, 1999). Which one – what content – is the most fundamentally relevant to political knowledge? The *Republic* sweeps to an answer by means of a grand metaphysical analogy in Book VI. Just as the light of the sun makes physical objects visible, so the light of the Good makes the Forms intelligible – that is, visible to the mind's eye. The Good, because intelligibility and purpose can only be understood in light of (in terms of) goodness. As the *Timaeus* suggests, the world can be explained only insofar as it is good; where goodness runs out, so does explanation, and we are left confronting sheer, mere matter.⁸

Grasping the Good is, therefore, the fundamental aim of reason and so the orienting purpose of any well-ordered soul. Putting the Good into practice is the special task of politicians in the city as it is the task of each person in his or her own life. Loving and seeking after the Good – even if one does not have full contemplative knowledge of it – is itself enough to quiet and tame all other possible desires in the soul. And this is why those who are converted to the cause of reason and philosophy – even if they lack a full philosophical education – will themselves be just.

Contrary to those who have followed Sachs (1963) in claiming that Plato has simply performed a bait and switch, substituting justice as psychic harmony for the conventional interpersonal justice which he is supposed to be defending, the *Republic* takes pains to point out that people who are psychically just will have no motive to behave unjustly towards others. Having defined justice in the soul as in the city as each part doing its own work, Socrates assures Glaucon that they can dispel any "doubts" as to whether justice in the soul is the same as in the city "by appealing to ordinary cases" (IV, 442d–e): "For example, if we had to come to an agreement about whether someone similar in training and nature to our [just] city had embezzled a deposit of gold or silver that he had accepted, who do you think would consider him to have done it?" (443a). Glaucon is quick to agree that no one would suspect the psychically just person of such embezzlement, nor, in response to further questions by Socrates, of "temple robberies, thefts, betrayals of friends in private life or of cities in public life . . . [being] untrustworthy in keeping an oath or other agreement . . . [or engaging in] adultery, disrespect for parents, and neglect of the gods" (443a).

8. For a different account of explanation in the *Timaeus*, grounded in mathematics rather than explicit appeal to the good, see in this volume Brisson, PLATO'S NATURAL PHILOSOPHY AND METAPHYSICS.

Put simply, the psychically just have no desire for the fruits of injustice, their desire being oriented solely toward the good. The just man "puts himself in order, is his own friend, and harmonizes the three parts of himself like three limiting notes in a musical scale . . ." (IV, 443d). Socrates' friendship for Glaucon and Adeimantus can aid them to befriend themselves in this way, even if they must cling only to an intimation of the Good rather than a full and complete contemplative knowledge of it. Such friendship, embedded not in elenchus but in constructive conversation, is in one sense political, since it involves Socrates using his reason to improve and bolster that of the youths. But it is more natural than ordinary politics since it is based on a potential affinity of reason and virtue, and the aspiration to a truly mutual friendship in virtue akin to that which Aristotle would later idealize.⁹ The politics of friendship aims, we might say, to outgrow the need for politics at all. Where friendship succeeds, it can implement ethics at least in individual souls; where it fails or is impossible, the full politics of Kallipolis must await the chance or necessity of the rule of philosophers.

Statesman

The *Republic* is framed as an inquiry into the definition of justice and its bearing on happiness; the *Statesman*, as an inquiry into the definition of the eponymous person with genuine political knowledge. For the former, the purpose of an inquiry into ruling knowledge is to establish justice and happiness; for the latter, the purpose of the inquiry is simply to define the nature of that knowledge which could rule more precisely. In particular the *Statesman* makes two points which go unnoticed in the *Republic*: ruling knowledge is not simply knowledge of the good, but knowledge of the good in time (the *kairos*); and such inherently flexible knowledge of the *kairos* must be made authoritative over the unchanging and approximate requirements of fixed laws (Lane, 1998, pp. 132–3, 139–45, 193–202). So for the *Statesman*, the antithesis of the true statesman is the sophist conceived as a politician – the person who pretends to knowledge but exercises rule without it. Such a sophist may be found in any kind of regime lacking genuine knowledge, which is to say in all regimes existing in Plato's day. In the *Republic*, in contrast, the antithesis of the true statesman, that is to say, of the philosopher-ruler, is as we have seen the tyrant – not simply any person who rules without knowledge, but specifically that ignorant ruler whose appetites and power are most spectacularly unbridled.¹⁰

The same equation – those who know should rule – lies at the heart of both dialogues. In the *Republic*, the relevant knowledge is defined as knowledge of the good, and attention is focused on the perspective of the rulers – how they will be educated, the puritanical conditions in which they must live (eugenic breeding, no recognized

9. In this volume, see Pakaluk, ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS.

10. So in *Republic* VIII, democracy is the next-to-worst of the imperfect regimes, better only than tyranny. In the *Statesman* (303a–b), democracy without true knowledge is the best of bad regimes (defined as regimes not governed by a true statesman) since democrats have less power of action than tyrants and oligarchs and so can do in their ignorance the least harm.

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families, no property) in order to exclude the greed which would shatter their unity as a group. In the *Statesman*, the relevant knowledge is defined as knowledge of the good in time, and attention is focused on defining that knowledge as opposed to other forms (and pretences) of knowledge – the true statesman becomes a cipher, his perspective being reduced to the nature of his knowledge alone. The effort of definition itself commands attention in the latter dialogue; the loose methods of analogy which Socrates had used in the *Republic*, contrast with the precise methodological instructions and corrections issued by the Eleatic Stranger in the *Statesman*. And whereas the myth of Er cemented the reasons for the individual to be just and virtuous, the “myth” of the *Statesman* – a fabrication from three legends with a particular version of the legendary rule of Kronos at its core – instead serves to define the conditions of political life for what has earlier been called the “human herd.” The *Republic*'s myth teaches that justice pays; the *Statesman*'s, that politics is necessary, non-grandiose, and must be carefully distinguished from the other arts (Lane, 1998, pp. 117–25).

We saw earlier that it is not implausible (though ultimately unpersuasive) to argue that the *Republic* is essentially an ethical rather than political dialogue. One could make no such argument about the *Statesman*. This is a philosophical dialogue about politics (Migliori, 1996, p. 197), whereas the *Laws*, as we shall see below, is largely a work of politics. Another way to put the differences between the projects of the *Republic* and the *Statesman* is to say with Malcolm Schofield (1999, p. 37) that whereas the *Republic* begins with the question of the good or best political regime and discusses statecraft as a way to bring this regime about (and so becomes preoccupied with the question of how would-be rulers could gain the knowledge needed to do so), the *Statesman* in contrast begins with the more general question of the nature of political expertise in rule as such, saying nothing about how someone might acquire it and relatively little about what the city ruled by it would be like. The *Statesman*'s project is at once more general and more narrow.

In return for this narrowness of focus, which excludes some of the fundamental challenges of political life, the *Statesman* offers a more complex understanding of the nature of political knowledge and indeed of the nature of knowledge itself. The methods of division and of example which are employed (along with the myth) lay out the structure of knowledge of the relationship between different arts in terms of differentiation and interrelationship. The *Statesman*'s knowledge is located within this structure and consists in grasping the structure as a whole.

The price of this systematic investigation is the abandonment of virtually all meaningful dialectical interaction; at the outset the Stranger announces his preference for monologue, or if need be, for dialogue with a suitably tractable interlocutor, and his anonymity strips him of the political entanglements which the character of Socrates would have brought to mind for any Greek reader. The *Republic* seeks to redirect ambitious youth to the life of philosophy by offering them a compelling argument in the mouth of the charismatic Socrates; in the *Statesman*, a younger boy serves mainly as a foil for a Stranger whose city is renowned for metaphysics rather than ethics, and whose age is not specified – he appears ageless, anonymous, the voice of pure discriminating reason. (We shall see later that the *Laws*, in contrast to both, is a conversation among old men [Schofield, 2003, pp. 4–6 and *passim*]; lacking either political ambition to be tamed, or the impetus to set out on a comprehensive

philosophical quest, they devote themselves to reflection on their experiences of political life.)

But perhaps the most startling apparent contrast between the *Statesman*, on the one hand, and the *Republic* and *Laws* on the other, is their characterization of the rule of law. While law is not flagged as a problematic topic in the *Republic*, it is relied upon as a form of surrogate reason, both in the envisaging of how the philosophers will proceed to rule, and in the law-making which Socrates and his interlocutors themselves engage in as "founders" of the ideal city. And in the *Laws*, as we shall see later, law is conceived as more than merely a surrogate for reason: it is called the embodiment of divine reason itself. Toward the end of the *Statesman*, however, the Stranger homes in on the distinction between sophists and statesmen by recalling that their whole discussion has been guided by the crucial criterion involved: the possession or lack of expertise. So whereas, he suggests, existing regimes classify themselves as democracies or oligarchies, tyrannies or monarchies, on the basis of criteria such as the wealth of the rulers, the voluntary willingness of the subjects to be ruled, or the use of written laws, none of these criteria is relevant to the definition of statecraft (293a-e). The true statesman might force things on his subjects, or dispense with the use of laws altogether, without forfeiting his claim to be practicing an art which benefited subjects by making them better.

Here Young Socrates is driven to object, in the name of fundamental Greek assumptions rather than specifically democratic ones: he does not question the use of force on unwilling subjects, but finds it hard to accept that one could rule without laws (293e) — this may simply strike him as an oxymoron.¹¹ In response the Stranger develops the thought that law is inherently imperfect, in that it is unable to address itself to individual peculiarities or changing circumstances. Statecraft, it will emerge, is defined by its ability to judge when something should be done or not done, whereas law can only repeat the same order over and over. Yet in the absence of the true statesman, or when people are (wrongly) fearful that a true statesman would harm rather than benefit them, the second-best plan is to stick to existing laws rigidly rather than suffer them to be changed for selfish or stupid reasons by someone ignorant. The "sophists" include both those who preside over the second-best constitutions in which law is observed, and those who make a bad situation worse by attempting to change the laws without knowledge: they comprise all politicians except the true statesman. As Christopher Rowe has persuasively if controversially argued, these second-best

11. The idea that rule without law would seem to Young Socrates an oxymoron now seems to this writer the most attractive explanation of why he objects to this point in particular (and not, e.g., to the argued irrelevance of force vs. voluntariness). This is not incompatible with Lane (1998, pp. 148–52), which argues against Gill's (1995) reading of Young Socrates as a spokesman for Athenian constitutionalism, on the ground that the Athenians did not conceive their laws as a "restraining framework" which could not be changed. But it now seems to me clear that the use of law would seem to Young Socrates to be a feature of any possible and existing regime; it is left to the Eleatic Stranger to point out that the mere existence of laws is not what distinguishes regimes, but rather their stance in either observing or failing to observe their laws.

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regimes have no means of access to the laws which a true statesman would prescribe: their virtue as "second-best" lies only in their sticking to whatever laws they happen to have (Rowe, 1995, ad. loc.; Rowe, 2001, pp. 68–74; but see criticism in Samaras, 2002, pp. 171–80).

Once this criterial point (Cooper, 1999, p. 101) has been established – that nothing is relevant to the definition of an expert except his expertise – it can be admitted that the statesman will indeed use laws to establish the necessary common opinion between divergent groups of citizens. In this passage the two summative accounts of statecraft – the one, its definition in relation to the rival arts, as the master art which governs when each of the other arts should act (305c–d); the other, as the political weaver of civic unity (305e) – come together. The statesman was defined against his closest rivals – rhetors, generals, and judges – in terms of his knowing the "*kairos*" – the right moment or opportunity – when it is fitting to use or pronounce persuasion or force, war or peace, guilt or innocence. Now it turns out that as political weaver, his task is to embed recognition of the *kairos* in the judgments of the citizens, modifying their natural tendencies to misjudge in characteristic ways (some too boldly, others too timidly) so that both groups can be made virtuous (courageous or moderate) and united by common opinion and by marriages (Lane, 1998, pp. 171–82).¹² Defined by his expert knowledge of the *kairos* (which Aristotle would call "the good in time"), the *Statesman* can unlike ordinary sophistic lawmakers shape the laws and modify them when necessary so that the good can be achieved despite the flux of circumstance.

Images used by the Stranger suggest that the statesman will not be a permanent resident of the city whose laws he frames. He is compared to an athletics coach or trainer, and to a doctor, both of whom may go away for a while leaving written prescriptions (laws) for their patients to follow, yet who should be obeyed if on return they order the written prescriptions to be discarded or changed. The practice of voluntarily or compulsorily leaving the city for which they had written laws was not unknown among Greek lawgivers. The idea of a lawgiver or statesman who stands outside the city that he shapes here becomes central to Plato's political thought.

Whereas readers tend to contrast this itinerant eponymous statesman with the resident and (eventually) native philosopher-rulers of the *Republic*, this is a mistake. For as Socrates' eagerness to convince even the guardians to believe the "noble lie" about the city's origins in the *Republic* (III, 414d) shows, the *Republic's* rulers belong within the city rather than outside. It is Socrates and his interlocutors in the *Republic* who are the real counterparts to the statesman of the *Statesman*, as to the interlocutors of the *Laws*. Once the superiority of knowledge over law has been vindicated by the *Statesman*, the dialogue is content to consider the statesman as a legislator when he needs to be, but stresses throughout that his role is to be outside the city, an occasional sojourner there rather than a resident or native ruler. As this dialogue brings out more

12. Arends (2001, pp. 136–8) has rightly criticized the translation in Lane (1998), of 307d, contrasting it with the correct translation by Rowe (reprinted in Cooper, 1997), which runs as follows: "this disagreement, of these classes of people, is a sort of play; but in relation to the most important things, it turns out to be a disease which is the most hateful of all for cities."

clearly than most, Plato's political thought is framed and located most comfortably at the level of the statesman who shapes, founds, and then withdraws, not that of the ordinary or regular participant in political life.

The Laws

If the *Republic* is a work of soaring moral-political imagination, and the *Statesman* one of painstaking methodologico-political clarification, the *Laws* is a work of comprehensive "theologico-political" (Laks, 2000, p. 292) reflection and prescription. It is unique among Plato's dialogues in its setting, and in the fact that Socrates plays no role in it. Whereas many dialogues show Socrates talking primarily with Athenian citizens (as in the *Republic*) or depict visitors and "strangers" to Athens (as in the *Statesman*), this one presents an "Athenian Stranger" in conversation with two fellow old men, the Spartan Megillus and the Cretan Clinias, while walking to the top of Mt. Ida in Crete to sacrifice at Zeus's shrine. It has been observed that this presents a deliberate form of inter-cultural dialogue, between old men who escape the wise lawmaker's ban on legal questioning and dissent among the young, but who lack the philosophical bent of the Eleatic Stranger (Gill, 2003). While the conversation begins with the Athenian Stranger simply proposing that they occupy themselves with discussion of laws and constitutions (in fact, it famously begins with the word "*theos*," as the Stranger asks his companions whether their people ascribe the authorship of their laws to god or man), it takes a new turn at the end of Book III, when Clinias reveals that he has been chosen as one of ten men of Cnossos (a city in Crete) to frame the legislation for the new colony of Magnesia. The rest of the conversation, which consists of nine further books (and according to ancient testimony was left on wax tablets at Plato's death, which has been taken to imply that it was unfinished), constructs a model legislative framework for this new colony.

It is important to note that, like the ideal city of the *Republic* (II, 369a; IX, 592a-b), the city of the *Laws* is founded "in speech" (III, 702e) rather than in actuality; the purpose is to advise Clinias for his later practical deliberations rather than to enact those deliberations themselves. Yet it matters equally that the colony in view will be populated by "volunteers," whose fallibility and flawed education is not seen to pose a mortal threat to the new city, whereas the *Republic* is driven to suggest that everyone over the age of ten should be exiled to the countryside in order to start the new order off with a clean slate. Here, the people come first and the city's rule must be adjusted to suit them (within limits: in both dialogues, hopelessly bad people are to be exiled), whereas in the *Republic*, the rulers come first and it is their character and knowledge that determine the nature of the city. Indeed, in the *Laws* the people will themselves play an active role in ruling themselves, a balance between "monarchy" and "democracy" being a crucial aspect of the constitution (III, 693e). The philosophers who must be ever-present and ever-watchful in the *Republic* contrast with the statesman who withdraws in the *Statesman*, and both contrast with the *Laws* where the constitution for Magnesia involves no single ruler or group of rulers in whom knowledge uniquely resides.

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It is important to note here that the Athenian Stranger's claim – repeated several times in the text – that the city of Magnesia is of the “second rank,” is never made explicitly with reference to the *Republic*. In Book V of the *Laws*, the first-ranking “ideal society” is described as a “community of wives, children and all property,” a phrase undeniably evocative of the *Republic*. But this community is specified as “put into practice as widely as possible throughout the entire state” (739c), as opposed to the *Republic* where it is explicitly restricted to the guardian-rulers. Book IX of the *Laws* by contrast does seem implicitly to suggest that the city of the *Laws* is second-best, as compared not to the city of the *Republic* but to that of the *Statesman*. The prelude to laws about violence explains the necessity of laws by saying that: “no man has sufficient natural gifts *both* to discern what benefits men in their social relationships *and* to be constantly ready and able to put his knowledge to the best practical use” (875a) (emphasis in the English translation used but not in the Greek).

So it will be difficult for anyone to grasp the theoretical truth that the aim of the true *politikē technē* is “not the interest of private individuals, but the common good”; and even if someone could grasp this and gain a position of absolute control over a city, “his human nature will always drive him to look to his own advantage and the lining of his own pocket” (875b). This sounds like a critique of the possibility of the *Statesman's* ideal ruler ever coming to exist. But the Athenian continues to affirm both the superiority of such rule by knowledge (rather than law) and the possibility that the “grace of God” could bring it about:

But if ever by the grace of God (*theia moira*) some natural genius were born, and had the chance to assume such power, he would have no need of laws to control him. Knowledge is unsurpassed by any law or regulation; reason, if it is genuine and really enjoys its natural freedom, should have universal power: it is not right that it should be under the control of anything else, as though it were some sort of slave. But as it is, such a character is nowhere to be found, except a hint of it here and there. That is why we need to choose the second alternative, law and regulation, which embody general principles, but cannot provide for every individual case. (875c–d)¹³

It is striking that the *Republic*, too, invokes the need for a “divine dispensation” (*theou moiran*, VI, 493a) in order to save the soul of a potential philosopher (and so potential ruler or founder of Kallipolis) from corruption. Paradoxically, then, it is the political projects of the *Republic* and the *Statesman* – where theology is far less emphasized – which are said to depend for their very possibility of realization on divine intervention. Magnesia, which requires no divine dispensation to be established (despite the Athenian's pious prayer for divine favor, IV, 712b, and as opposed to the regime ruled by the “natural genius” described above), is therefore not a theocracy (a regime ruled

13. See Schofield (2003, pp. 7–11), contrasting this passage with IV, 712b–715e and XII, 957c (where the rule of law is identified with reason and divinity) and comparing all three with the *Statesman*. Schofield suggests that the *Laws'* theological framework and its limited philosophical ambitions go together.

and "slave doctors" (that is, doctors treating slaves) are most naturally read to support the idea that the laws, like free doctors, seek to be efficacious through rational persuasion of those they govern (IV, 720a-e; IX, 857c-e). But some critics have challenged the rationality of the actual preludes contained (as examples) in the text of the *Laws*, and have gone on to argue that Plato is not here envisaging rationally autonomous citizens who operate primarily on the basis of rational argument: with their behavior so controlled and prescribed, restrictions on their ability to travel abroad, strict military discipline, is Plato really depicting a city of potentially rational and virtuous citizens, or a city of thought-policed robots?

Cases for and against the rationality of the preludes as described, and as exemplified, have been made powerfully on both sides.¹⁴ The present writer contends that while the preludes are conceived as rational, and (with allowances for context) are mostly presented as exercises in rational persuasion, Plato also consistently in the *Laws* (as in the *Republic*) insists on, and dramatizes, the fact that compulsion and persuasion cannot always be so readily distinguished in theory or separated in practice. Socrates is compelled to explain the community of wives, children and property in the *Republic* (V, 449a-450b); it is less often noticed that the *Laws* also involves two notable dramatic references to compulsion should persuasion fail. In Book VI (753a) the Athenian proposes to Clinias that he should himself become a citizen of the new colony of Magnesia, "with your consent (failing which, you'll be gently compelled)." In Book XII, Clinias and Megillus agree in turn that they must get the Athenian himself to join the colony by refusing "to let him leave us," and using "entreaties and every ruse we can think of" (that is, persuasion and deception) to accomplish that aim (969c). In Book IV also, the young dictator whose rule is called the easiest and quickest way to change the laws of a state, is said to combine "persuasion with compulsion" (711c).¹⁵

In short, the role of persuasion is important, but not unaccompanied by compulsion whether by legal penalties or by other forces. And its role is rather to shape the character of the citizens than to acknowledge their independent right as the ultimate judges of political power, in the way that practices of persuasion in the Athenian assembly and lawcourts did. The rule of law in Plato's vision here takes over the authority of the democratic Athenian assembly, and accords authority to the citizens only insofar as they are themselves molded to recognize its own rationality and authority (Allen, 2000, pp. 179-90). "Voluntary" acceptance of rule by the citizens of a true *politeia* – as contrasted with the "unwilling" subjects of the factional regimes of tyranny, oligarchy and democracy – does not exclude a role for compulsion in molding that acceptance (VIII, 832c-d).

14. For the case against, see for example Stalley (1994), and the more moderate Laks (2000, pp. 289-90), both criticizing Bobonich (1999 [1991]). Samaras (2002, pp. 310-25) advances the debate by arguing that while the theory of preludes is indeed one of rational persuasion (even if not all preludes in the text exhibit this), Plato's commitment to rational persuasion here does not commit him to a liberal view of individual choice or freedom.

15. Nevertheless, one place where persuasion and compulsion are conjoined in the *Republic* – in order to get the rule of philosophers started in the first place – is avoided in the *Laws* by the assumption that the colonists will be (screened) volunteers (IV, 708aff.; V, 741a).

Given that the psychology of the *Laws* does lay emphasis (though not sole emphasis) on rational persuasion, it underpins a politics in which citizens can play diverse roles. The establishment of the magistracies in Book VI involves law-wardens, commanders, a Council and its subdivisions, stewards for the city, the land, and the markets, officials for education and competition in music and gymnastic, and judges. All these are to be elected by various forms of restricted nomination and suffrage, many involving property class: democratic equality must have its share in the city, though it is less correct and perfect than the kind of equality which is proportional to worth, but its share cannot be complete as in the Athenian practice of selection by lot. In Book XII the *euthunai*, or scrutineers of the law-wardens, are given a far more exalted role than the office of that name in Athens; they are the guardians who must guard the guardians. And Book XII also introduces the famous or infamous "Nocturnal Council" (a more accurate name would be the less sinister "Dawn Council," as they are to meet near dawn), a group of experienced and wise elderly men, each accompanied by an apprentice younger man. They have no magisterial power in the city but are charged with reviewing its laws, partly in light of embassies to the outside, in order to make sure that they remain as rational as possible.

Although the Stranger acknowledges that many details must be omitted and left to the law-wardens to determine, what strikes any reader of Books VII–VIII is the extraordinary level of detail which is in fact provided. The Athenian declares earlier that, "Nothing, so far as possible, shall be left unguarded" (VI, 760a), and in fact, nothing so far as possible is to be left unregulated: infants' clothing, children's games, pregnant women's diet, all are prescribed so as to begin shaping the experience of pleasures and pains from the very moment of conception, going on to agricultural and market laws to safeguard the food supply. Books IX, XI, and part of XII are the principal locus of the penal laws and the discussion of punishment, which is consistent with Platonic principles of punishment elsewhere in the corpus in holding that punishment should aim at improving the offender's soul. The Athenian also keeps faith with the Socratic paradox that no one does injustice willingly, coping with its radical implications for the penal code by reassigning the distinction between voluntary and involuntary criminal action to the notion of injury effected rather than that of (always involuntary) injustice intended.

Throughout the work is reiterated the theme of age, contrasting the political difference between old men who can be trusted on the basis of experience, and young men who may be rash in their judgments of city, self, and gods, and who need to be tempered to respect the law. Also reiterated is the theme of the divinity of reason which can be embodied in laws, and so guide mortal nature with a divine cord. These two themes together help to show that the supposed Actonian pessimism about absolute power corrupting absolutely is not in fact present in the *Laws*. The passage where it is most often discerned (IX, 875b–d) says that any man with knowledge and power will be driven by his "human nature" to use that power for his own advantage. But this does not exclude the possibility raised in the "golden cord" puppet image (I, 645a) that his "human nature" might be controlled by something divine in him. If the emphasis on divinity in political affairs distinguishes the *Laws* from other Platonic works, this very emphasis makes it possible for the dialogue to keep faith with the aspiration to rulers with knowledge and virtue which characterizes them all.

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Conclusion

In writing these three dialogues Plato explored what political philosophy could and should be from different angles and according to different understandings of philosophy itself. Yet all Plato's political explorations pursue the basic thought that knowledge alone can make action virtuous and so make people happy and their lives worth living. It follows that whoever possesses such knowledge – which Plato assumes throughout his work to be potentially and at most only a few people – must ensure that somehow or other it governs the actions of all.

Plato's political philosophy, as enunciated in the three major works considered in this chapter, goes beyond the criticism of Athenian democracy with which it presumably began, to inquire into the ethical basis of power and the true significance of all existing constitutional forms. The dialogues speak through many voices to explore the possibility of constructing a politics aiming at virtue, for souls who are divided, in a world constrained by necessity and requiring the divine or semi-divine guidance of reason in the form of philosophy, statecraft, or law.¹⁶

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MELISSA LANE

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